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2 Local Attorneys Relate Their Roles In Captive Ransom

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By Sterling Seagrave
Staff Reporter

In the tense last minutes before the Cuban prisoner exchange became a reality, two young Washington attorneys worked without sleep in Havana to keep Castro from calling it off and turning the hair-trigger arrangements into a disaster.

E. Barrett Prettyman Jr., 37, and John E. Nolan Jr., 34, of Chevy Chase, yesterday gave a minute-to-minute account of hectic bartering with the Cuban premier right down to the wire and how two potentially explosive final decisions put the entire exchange in jeopardy.

Prettyman, son of retired Court of Appeals Judge E. Barrett Prettyman and a member of the law firm of Hogan and Hartson, flew to Havana early Saturday, charged with the task of releasing the ransom cargo of the SS African Pilot to Castro.

Talks Lead to Bonus

Prettyman's delicate talks with Castro led to an agreement permitting 1000 wives, children and relatives of the prisoners to leave Cuba on the ransom ship's return to the United States, as Castro's "Christmas bonus" in the exchange.

Nolan, an old friend of chief negotiator James B. Donovan and the man who organized a crack team of Washington attorneys, including Prettyman, to back up exchange efforts, was in Havana with Donovan negotiating the final release.

Nolan was given the ticklish job of flying back to Miami at the eleventh hour to somehow scrape up the additional \$2.9 million that Castro demanded before allowing the second half of the prisoners to leave.

Only 700 men had been freed when the airlift was stopped and Nolan rushed back for talks with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. About 400 prisoners, including the "high ante" invasion leaders, remained in Cuban hands until Nolan returned

with the additional ransom, which was to pay off Castro for 60 prisoners released earlier this year.

Prettyman said, "Until nearly noon Saturday I worked in a little office at the San Antonio de los Banos military airfield going over invoices with Dr. Leonard Scheele (former U. S. Surgeon General), and Cuban medical personnel.

"The ship was not to be unloaded until the word came from me.

"Then I heard shouting and I saw Fidel standing near one of our planes. There was a crowd around him. I walked over and Dr. Scheele introduced me to Fidel. His handshake was firm but his manner was formal.

"There was no bantering. We talked through an interpreter. Castro wore a military uniform like our Army fatigues with visor cap and side-arm.

Intelligence Report

"Fidel wanted to know how many planes had arrived, what was being unloaded from them. Their intelligence must be pretty good. Castro told me the African Pilot wouldn't be in until 2 p.m. and he proved right. He also said he knew who I was.

"He said the ship could not be unloaded until word came from him and he was 40 miles away from the pier.

"I told him he could appreciate that there had to be good faith gestures on both sides. We wanted the prisoners released before the ship was unloaded.

"Fidel said he would get us a car right away and that he would order some of the prisoners released at 5 p.m."

After lunch, Prettyman went to the African Pilot to check inventories. Shortly afterward, Castro arrived at the ship and invited Prettyman to take a tour of Havana.

Castro conducted a personal tour of Ernest Hemingway's home and his development. Meanwhile, the first plane load of prisoners left for Miami.

Prettyman said Castro seemed much more relaxed during the tour of Hemingway's finca (ranch). The finca seemed completely undisturbed and even the novelist's half-filled bottles were untouched.

The tour returned to the ship and Castro said he would declare a 24-hour truce with the United States while the vessel was being unloaded.

Prettyman and Scheele were given suites in the Havana Libre Hotel, which Prettyman said was sumptuous and obviously a showplace.

"Next day," prettyman went on, "I arrived at the airport and found a great deal of excitement and confusion. Word had come that Fidel had agreed to let the families of the prisoners go to the United States."

Prettyman then flew to Miami to clear the new arrangement with the shipping line, Immigration and Customs and other officials.

"My plane was the second one out Monday morning," he said.

When he stepped aboard the plane, Prettyman said he suddenly realized for the first time the importance of freedom to the prisoners.

"As soon as the men were aboard and knew they were free and the plane took off for Miami, they stopped their silent anxiety and broke into shouts and singing and crying. One man got on the plane's microphone and said prayer."

Immediately after his flight left Havana, the exchange was halted. The prisoners remaining at the Castro air base nearly cracked under the strain of realizing they might not be able to follow their comrades to freedom, Prettyman said. None of them knew what had brought the exchange to the abrupt halt.

Yesterday, Nolan explained how Castro demanded the extra \$2.9 million and stopped freeing the prisoners until Nolan flew back for the money.

"We knew Castro was going to ask for the money, but we didn't know how we were going to get it for him," Nolan said.

"I was with Donovan at the office of Economic Minister Regino Boti. Boti offered to drive me to the airport and arrange for my plane back to Miami to get the money.

"I told him, 'I can't do that. I could make the arrangements myself all right.'

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By Vic Casamento,
Staff Photographer

E. B. PRETTYMAN JR.
... tells of Cuban role



By Wally McNamee,
Staff Photographer

JOHN E. NOLAN, JR.

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Nolan said Boti seemed eager to assure the success of the rest of the exchange. He said Donovan went over to Boti and said there was only one thing Boti could do to keep everything functioning smoothly.

"Boti asked what it was that he could do. He was very formal," Nolan said. "Donovan leaned over close to Boti's ear and said: 'Don't defect!'"

4-Hour Ordeal

Nolan flew to Miami and returned just as Prettyman's plane was leaving Havana. The remaining 400 prisoners waited on the airfield until Castro was satisfied that the \$2.9 million was his.

At 5 p. m. the order went out and the remaining prisoners were on their way to freedom. Nolan and Donovan flew out on the last plane. Nolan told what happened in those last ticklish hours.

"Donovan had been debating with Castro over the exchange. His technique was to convince Castro that the prisoners were of no use to him. The time had passed when Castro could execute them.

"Castro said our prices were higher than European prices. Donovan told him he didn't care what Italian prices for prisoners were. He said: 'Don't talk European prices. Nobody else wants to buy them.'

Have a Cigar

"Donovan kept offering Castro cigars — the same cigars Castro had given Donovan. He'd say: 'Have a cigar.'

"There were a lot of Russians around. There were whole extensive sections of barracks of Russians or East Europeans at the air base."

"I wasn't sure at all we could get the money (the \$2.9 million for the 60 prisoners released earlier). I still don't know how we got it."

Both Prettyman and Nolan arrived home late for Christmas. Both said they were relieved at their success and planned to get some sleep.